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# 1

## BRIGHT PROMISES

The Jamaican morning sky was boiling with enormous red-gold incandescent clouds.

“Like my heart,” murmured Emerald happily as she turned from the small window in the upper loft of the old lookout house on Fishers Row. She fingered the ruby pendant at her pale throat.

The jewel burned with a dark red glory all its own, and she told herself that in possessing the ruby she also possessed the hard-won heart of Baret Buckingham. The pendant had belonged to his mother, the woman he esteemed above all others for her martyrdom for the Christian faith.

“Yet, he has honored *me* by bestowing the pendant as a fitting expression of his feelings,” she said aloud.

At the moment the ruby was more precious to her than the ornately carved and jeweled gold Buckingham ring that he would also give her at their public betrothal at Foxmoore within a few short weeks.

Emerald relived the thrilling moment when Baret had taken her into his arms in the garden at the Jamaican governor’s residence and told her that he loved *her*, not Cousin Lavender Thaxton, a wealthy future duchess!

She would hold his disclosure close to her breast and relish every detail again and again, remembering how he had willingly made the decision, speaking the golden words of Proverbs 31: “Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.”

Emerald’s emotions were tender, and musings came easily as she indulged the moment of youthful promise, drinking in and savoring the realization that he now believed in her chastity and honor, despite the lies that continued to dog her steps.

“I’m to actually wed him within a year!”

The idea of marrying a viscount left her distracted. Could she live up to this new status that would now be her mantle? With each day bringing new responsibilities, she wondered how she would fit into the customs of royalty and the upper class.

Matters had changed rather drastically for Baret these last weeks. Following Baret's victory over the Dutch Admiral de Ruyter near Barbados, his grandfather Earl Nigel now proudly received him. And the High Admiralty was willing to smooth over the piracy charges that were weighed against him, at least for the duration of the war with Holland. If Baret could locate and free his father and retrieve the hidden treasure of the *Prince Philip*, he might freely return to Whitehall and be received by King Charles.

*And I'll be on his arm, bowing to the king, she thought, shaking at the thought of the role she must learn to live in order not to shame Baret. How dreadful it could be to be received at Whitehall, to be requested to sup with the king, and then forget to say or do something important!*

Baret would help her, she decided. He knew exactly what was required. He would teach her how to behave at royal events. She could envision the knowing smiles hidden behind jeweled fans, though, and the jealous mean words spoken behind her back.

Emerald shut the distant future from her mind and concentrated instead on the wonders of the present. The Lord was her stay. She must never forget that.

Last night she had returned to her father's lookout house on Fishers Row in a romantic daze. She had sent Baret away when he hadn't wanted to leave, nervously laughing off his insistence that she reconsider and marry him before he sailed with Morgan. The romantic change that had come over him was astounding. She hadn't been able to sleep for thinking about his ardency. This was a Baret Buckingham she had never seen before, and she contemplated. She must be careful to keep matters between them from becoming too amorous until the year of engagement was over.

He had left her, leaving behind a guard and assuring her he would return in a few days. She had been so absorbed with these thoughts last night that she had tried in vain to fall asleep. She had also been basking in the astounding news that her beloved father was alive. Sir Karlton was a galley slave aboard a Dutch

ship and in danger, yet she was thankful, nonetheless, that he was believed to be alive.

And this morning she would go to Foxemoore to free her cousin Minette from slavery in the cane fields.

Indeed, the bright change in her previously dark circumstances was almost too much blessing to handle in so few hours. The Lord had been so good and gracious to her that she felt like the "sweet singer of Israel," who had written, "My cup runneth over."

She turned, hearing a loud rap on the front door below and Zeddie leaving the cook room to answer it.

Who could that be? Emerald came out of the loft used as a bedroom and peered down the steep ladderlike steps into the small room below.

A young lad stood in the doorway, whom she recognized from the *Regale* as Jeremy, Baret's bosun. He offered a warm grin to Zeddie and, seeing her on the steps, swept off his hat and bowed low.

"There's boxes for Lady Harwick. All from Cap'n Foxworth—I mean, his lordship. And where would ye like 'em all?"

Zeddie, who had returned a few hours earlier from Foxemoore with news of Minette, straightened his golden periwig and went out to help bring them inside. Soon, the warped and creaking floor was piled high, and Emerald stood staring.

"A good mornin' to ye, Miss." Jeremy tipped his hat again. "I'll be telling his lordship you're looking fair." And he backed away from the door and left.

Emerald came rushing down the stairs, amazed at the sight. Boxes sat everywhere, dozens of them. They proved to be full of astounding gifts that left her oohing and aahing like a bewildered child at Christmas. Frocks made of lush velvet, sateen, and silk—the velvet in her favorite color, royal blue. There were crinolines. And even silk stockings! She blushed to think he would dare to send them, but the blush did not last long once she held them and felt their smooth, rich texture. There were slippers too. She could only wonder how he had known her size, for they fit perfectly. He had noticed more about her than she had thought.

"I must be careful," she lectured herself. "We're not married yet—even the engagement isn't for two weeks. Some would

say I shouldn't be accepting gifts—but, oh!—Baret isn't a rogue like that odious Sir Jasper. I can wear them safely enough. And anyway, I'll die if I can't!" And she held up a pair of adorable black satin slippers with tasteful buckles.

Zeddie chuckled. "Aye, m'gal, ye've got yourself a treasure chest of fancy things, to be sure. Captain Foxworth knows how he wants ye to be lookin', that's plain to see. Next thing is jewels, but ye'll be gettin' them in England at Buckingham House, I'm thinkin'."

Once Emerald and Zeddie had carried all the clothes up the steps to her loft, she spent the next hour trying them on and admiring them, while Zeddie, singing, left the lookout house to catch some fish for their supper. She was humming and looking at herself in the mirror when she heard a horse whinny and the call of male voices below the front steps. She rushed to the window and leaned out, looking below, and a moist warm wind tossed her dark hair.

Two men were leading a magnificent horse, whose neigh greeted the morning like merry laughter.

"Ho, there!" came the lead man's voice. "Anyone home?"

The large bewhiskered man looked up to the window and, seeing Emerald, swept off his battered straw hat, showing a tangle of gray-black waves. "A fair mornin' to you, Miss. Kennedy at your service. His lordship Baret Buckingham bade me to make a delivery to his soon-to-be bride." He settled back on his heels and shifted his glance to the ramshackle house. "But I be thinking a wee mistake is made. We're lost to finding the proper abode. 'Twas wondering if ye might tell us where to find a miss called Lady Emerald Harwick."

Emerald's cinnamon-brown eyes twinkled, for they obviously didn't expect to find a viscount's "lady" living in a lookout house. "I'm Lady Emerald Harwick," she said with a laugh. "Do you wish to speak to me, Mr. Kennedy?"

The man was rabbit quick to redeem himself. Clearing his raspy throat, he looked up at her with a grave face so as to hide his contrary thoughts. "Aye, I shoulda known, m'lady, 'twas you," came the polite voice, and he fished in his pocket and withdrew a sealed envelope, which he held up. "This be for you, m'lady, from Lord Buckingham. Will ye come down to fetch it?"

She smiled. "I'll be right down, Mr. Kennedy."

A moment later she stepped out onto the front porch where the Port Royal morning welcomed her with sea breezes laden with brine. Gulls screamed their familiar cry over the wharf, where the port's water tugged and sucked at the pilings. Accepting the envelope, Emerald gazed at the seal bearing an elaborate "B."

Before she could open it, Mr. Kennedy explained. "The mare and buggy are a gift, m'lady," and he gestured across Fishers Row.

Another gift? Curiously she looked across the narrow cobbled street to see a charming little horse-drawn buggy with a blue fringe top dancing in the breeze.

"Oh! It's stunning," she cried.

Then she read the brief message: "One so lovely should ride home to Foxemoore in style."

"Home." Emerald lingered over the brief but warm, telling words, smiling wistfully. She was overwhelmed by Baret's thoughtful gift, for his was no pauper's generosity. She knew something of horses, and this mare was a fine-blooded specimen. She laughed to herself. She would certainly make a stir returning to Foxemoore now, wearing blue velvet and lace, a ruby pendant, and driving a new buggy drawn by a blooded mare! She suspected Baret knew as much and had done so deliberately.

She read his concluding remarks: "I shall join you as soon as the captains' meeting with Morgan is concluded. If Pitt gives you any more trouble, tell him I'll hang him myself."

As the men left, Emerald affectionately rubbed the nose of the mare and patted her graceful neck. "You're a worthy gift, but coming from Baret, you are a sweet prize indeed."

Then she saw Zeddie coming up the beach with a gunny-sack of fresh fish. The tall gaunt man, garbed in faded blue coat with tarnished gold lace, was whistling as he trudged up to the steps. She knew his two big boarding pistols were loaded. In his younger years he had been a crack shot, as he always liked to announce. He had fought in the Civil War in England, where he had lost an eye. He'd been sent to Barbados as a political prisoner in the days of Cromwell, and her father, who had known him in England, had found him on Governor Modyford's sugar plantation and arranged to buy his freedom. Zeddie ever remained a strong ally and served as bodyguard to Emerald.

He straightened his black eye patch, and his whistled tune

turned to a low note of exclamation. He examined the mare, then looked across at the waiting buggy, whose fringe still jiggled in the tropical breeze.

"I'm thinking old Pitt will have his eyes poppin' when he sees you, m'gal. 'Twill be sweet to boot the cunning shark out of Karlton's bungalow." He dropped the gunnysack of fish and rubbed his hands together with exaggerated anticipation. Then he tapped his dyed purple-leather baldric, and his one keen eye turned as hard as a smooth ocean pebble. "Pitt's got himself a bit of luck that his lordship isn't coming with you now—his neck will be spared. Wouldn't take much to have his lordship hang the rat-toothed scoundrel."

"I'm in no mood to hang anyone today, Zeddie, not even that treacherous Mr. Pitt. This isn't a time for vengeance. Don't you remember how David treated his enemies when he became king of Israel? Why, he could have had old Shimei cut down with the sword for cursing him when he left Jerusalem during Absalom's rebellion. Instead, he let him go free when he returned as king."

"Aye, but it ain't no fun! Not where Pitt goes."

She laughed and handed him the reins. "After having landed Baret Buckingham, I've grace enough and to spare for the meanest of wretches—" her smile faded and her eyes grew determined "—as long as he doesn't contest my good plans."

"Now you're talking, m'gal."

Hiking up her skirts about her ankles, Emerald rushed up the creaking wood steps to change. She stopped in front of the door and looked down the steps at him. "I'm anxious to dress and be on our way to Foxemoore. This is Minette's shining hour too. Next time Sir Erik Farrow sees my cousin, he'll wonder indeed."

Zeddie chuckled, as delighted by it all as though *he* were the inheritor of good fortune.

She looked over at her new buggy and sighed. It was just the beginning. This would be her first arrival at Foxemoore since the slave uprising and the tragic death of Great-uncle Mathias. She wondered what her beloved minister uncle would think if he knew she was going to marry a Buckingham. Well, he had more wonderful things to occupy him now. He had looked upon the

fair face of the Lord Jesus Himself, for the apostle Paul had written, "Absent from the body . . . present with the Lord."

Inside the loft she chose a cool silk dress of palest lime color with lemon flower buds on the neck and cuffs and readied herself for the trip inland. There was a matching hat with a trailing yellow ribbon and a dainty white lace parasol. She noticed that all the colors flattered her dark hair and brown eyes and that there was a certain sweetness to the styles. She knew Baret well enough by now to understand the kind of woman he found attractive. No low-cut dresses such as they wore shamelessly in London.

A half hour later she looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes glowed as warmly as the tropics, while her ivory skin bore little evidence of having experienced the burning sun. Her thick dark tresses were arranged at the back of her neck, and in place of the prized silver cross embedded with pearls that her mother had given her, and which she carried in a little sachet near her heart, the ruby now glimmered at her throat where Baret had placed it the night before under the mammoth yellow moon.

She surprised even herself by the change. A stranger would think her a great lady indeed. Oh, dear! She didn't want to make Lavender jealous, but she surely would, for it was in Lavender's heart to be envious and spoiled to the point that she resented happiness coming to anyone else. And to have captured Baret's heart away from her . . .

Emerald frowned worriedly. Dealing day by day with Cousin Lavender might prove as difficult as dealing with Mr. Pitt. *May the Lord give me discernment and wisdom to know how best to fill my new position without rubbing brine into Lavender's wounded pride.* It took as much spirituality to be gracious to others when in blessing as it did to endure the filth and injustice of Brideswell.

*I know how to be abased, but do I know how to abound?*

With the shares her father owned in the sugar estate and the shares that Baret possessed—including the extra shares recently granted him by Earl Nigel—she and Baret would own more of Foxmoore than even her father's cousin Geneva Harwick Buckingham. Geneva had been recently married to Baret's nefarious uncle, Lord Felix, who considered himself the rightful owner of all the Buckingham inheritance. She wondered how the conflicts would eventually work out. Baret was in no mood to

submit to Felix, whom he blamed for the imprisonment of his father on the Main.

She remembered Minette and grew sober. She had already packed a pretty new frock for her cousin, with all the essentials, intending to stop at her father's bungalow on the plantation before they entered the Great House together, so that Minette could bathe and change. They would enter side by side as blood cousins—unless her courage gave way in the end like a wet bag and she was left void of resolve. In which case, she might remain in the bungalow until Baret arrived and escorted her and Minette to the main house to meet with Lady Sophie Harwick. Perhaps it would be better if she waited, so they wouldn't think her flaunting.

Emerald shivered, thinking about entering through that ominous front door alone. Minette's presence would undoubtedly anger Lady Sophie. *Lord, give me wisdom to behave wisely, she prayed. All this blessing and change in my life is a gift from You. Help me to use it as You would have me do. Not for self-seeking but for the good of us all.*

A short time later she and Zeddie prepared to leave her father's abandoned lookout house. The place resembled the old lighthouse that had once awaited her homecoming with foreboding silence when she left Sir Jasper and the hacienda in Spanish Town. At that time, Emerald had been certain she could feel within its tall narrow walls the harbinger of trials to come. Those dreadful times did come, including her incarceration in Brideswell. The treachery had been intensified by the belief that her father was dead. Now, the sun was shining on her path. Happiness beckoned like a playful child for her to follow.

She looked at Zeddie, who offered her an elegant bow, extending her his arm. His good eye shone. "Coming, your ladyship?"

She smiled and looped her arm through his, and they walked out of the lookout house. The structure's plank flooring creaked beneath their feet. Her ears—soon for the last time—heard the water slapping against its pilings sunk deep into sand.

And then they were seated in the new buggy, and the mare pranced and shook her mane as Zeddie sat tall and straight-shouldered. He gave a flick to the reins.

Leaving Fishers Row behind, they were soon on the back road leading inland to Foxmoore. The sunlight caught the ruby

pendant at her throat, and it glowed warm and crimson. She looked at Zeddie and smiled.

“Ah, Missy, if your father could see you now, he’d be a happy man.”

A pair of seagulls lifted together on white wings and rose above the crystal blue Caribbean.

## 2

# RETURN TO FOXEMOORE

The sultry morning throbbed with birdsong, and green and blue parrots lodged in the branches of the Spanish breadfruit trees as freckled sunlight filtered through. Emerald breathed in the scent of moist warm earth and trumpet vine and tried to digest the awesome fact that if she married Baret she would become a wealthy heiress, not only of Foxemoore but of land and houses in England.

With a wink, Zeddie, whistling a sprightly tune, settled his tall black satin hat and gave a light flick of the reins to the mare, who trotted proudly down the brown roadway bringing them closer to Foxemoore. On the other side of the road, tall cane rustled in the wind like green waves, and Emerald listened to the rushing sound through the stalks. Above the miles of cane stretching toward the lush Blue Mountain Range, the sky was the color of a topaz.

Today she found nothing but pleasure in the familiar sights and smells surrounding her on the estate where she'd been brought as a small child from the notorious pirate stronghold of Tortuga.

Emerald sighed. "Zeddie, I must be dreaming. Just think, all this unexpected happiness and heaven too. Is it possible God could bless me so?" she mused, amazed at her recent circumstances.

He turned the buggy from the road onto the smaller one that led into Foxemoore. "See that weather vane?" He pointed to a wooden rooster that turned toward the unsettled breeze from the Caribbean. "No matter which way the wind blows, God is good. Say, m'gal, we ought to paint those words on the rooster. Then, no matter how he points, in storm or fair weather, he'll be telling out the truth." He looked at her. "But I'm still mean enough to dream on till I see old Pitt sent a-packing."

The very mention of Mr. Pitt brought Emerald a nervous pang. She peered ahead, lifting a hand to shade her eyes, and listened above the sighing green stalks for the sound of the slaves hoeing.

They rode toward the familiar cutoff at the end of the road, which brought them to the main carriageway, lined with fringed palms shaking in the wind. A quarter of a mile ahead, the planter's Great House stood on a grassy knoll facing windward, renewing both distressing and happy memories. On the far side of the carriageway lay a sweeping view of the green cane fields.

Emerald's heart swelled painfully. "Pull to the side," she said quietly. "I want to look at it a moment."

Zeddie brought the buggy under the dense shade of an overspreading hickory tree. She gazed up to the planter's Great House. Its white columns and red tile roof stood as she remembered from her childhood, with serene and superior aristocracy. Its magnificence still awed her and threatened her courage until she touched the ruby pendant at her throat. Someone, at least, believed in her—the earl's grandson!

Foxmoore had belonged to the Harwicks and the Buckingtons since before the days of Oliver Cromwell. During the great Civil War in England, several Harwicks fled to the West Indies, where they had built the sugar estate with money loaned by the great earl Killigrew Buckingham. The Buckingtons themselves had gone to France with the exiled King Charles and returned during the Reconstruction to reclaim their title and lands.

Earl Nigel Buckingham was now here and, for reasons of his own, was favoring the upcoming betrothal between her and Baret—at least until Lavender and Lord Grayford Thaxton were married. The earl then expected Emerald to return the Buckingham ring and melt quietly away into the Jamaican sunset. But when she had told this to Baret, he had laughed, because of his serious intentions to marry her. His confidence bolstered her own, yet she remained uncomfortably uneasy at times.

What would Lady Sophie Harwick say when she walked through the front door, bringing her cousin Minette with her?

"All right, Zeddie, let's go find Minette," she said quietly.

He drove the buggy off the carriageway onto the narrow work road that ran for a great length between the cane fields.

Emerald found that the familiar scene brought many

unpleasant memories, like clouds of stinging flies. She remembered an emotionally dark day several months ago when she had come down this road to keep her meeting with Mr. Pitt over the arrest of Cousin Ty. She remembered how she had failed to gain his consideration for a reprieve. Pitt had threatened that unless she came up with a bribe—the family jewels from her French cousin Rafael Levasseur—Pitt would haul Ty before the Jamaican magistrate to be branded as a runaway.

Emerald's eyes narrowed beneath her thick lashes as she relived the frustration of having no one to turn to for help, to have every door she knocked on bolted. Heaven had seemed brass to her prayers, and members of the Harwick family had turned a deaf ear to her pleas. In the end, Ty had indeed been hauled to the town pillory and branded on his handsome forehead like a steer branded by a rancher.

Emerald moved on the leather seat, trying to hold down the eruption of angry tension from bubbling forth like a volcano. Her eyes closed. It would do no good to get angry now. *It is too easy to hate Mr. Pitt*, she confessed to the Lord. *Help me to leave past injustice to You.*

What had happened in the past could not be undone. What mattered today was to find Minette and take her from the fields.

There was another reason for going to the manor house first. She wanted to search her father's trunk to see if she could locate the much-talked-about deed to his shares of Foxemoore sugar.

Whether or not such a deed existed had always been a matter of some question to Emerald. Her father, Sir Karlton, however, had insisted it was so.

"If I do not legally own a large share of the sugar production," he had said, "then why does Felix not take it to court? He'll not take the matter to law because the man knows I hold a legal document. And not simply a lease either, but I hold it free—and will forever! It is signed by the deceased Earl Esmond Buckingham himself."

*A legal document*, mused Emerald, as they drove along the cane, growing tall beside the narrow red-brown road. Did such a mysterious parchment actually exist, locked away in some box, or was it her father's spurious invention?

One morning he had brought her to his chamber to unlock

a small pirated silver treasure box and fish out a folded deed to show her. The paper might have been anything, since Emerald, twelve years old at the time, had been too young to appreciate its validity. Trust in her father and the official-looking gold seal had convinced her that his claim was true.

Until Lord Felix Buckingham had married her father's cousin Geneva Harwick, the Buckingtons had been absentee sugar magnates, living as blooded nobility in England and serving the court of His Majesty King Charles II, while the Harwicks, who were gentry, had run the estate.

But under Felix, all that had changed for the worse. Foxemoore was now doubling as its own merchant, using family ships to haul sugar into the American colonies and Quebec. Felix was also bringing back slaves to work land bought from a neighboring planter. Zeddie learned that the smaller planter had quietly been "encouraged" by Sir Jasper to sell out to Foxemoore against his will.

The knowledge disturbed Emerald. If she married Baret, that would allow them to control what went on in the plantation. Baret told her he would stand by her in making certain changes, especially rebuilding and enlarging the singing school of Great-uncle Mathias. But dare she contest some of the decisions made by Lord Felix? After all, she wasn't Baret's wife yet. She was inexperienced in the ways of ruling, and in Baret's absence, Felix would be sure to point this out on every occasion that proved her wisdom inferior to his.

She would need to move slowly when it came to making decisions that previously had been left to Lady Sophie, Geneva, and now to Felix. Lady Sophie, especially, would resent what she would mistake as "meddling." Nevertheless, there were some matters hot within her heart that Emerald would not compromise: the future of her cousins Minette and Ty and the translation of the slave chants in order to bring the slaves their own Christian hymns. She must locate her father's deed, which Baret had asked her about at the governor's meeting two days ago.

Resentment stirred from slumber as she remembered that Pitt had dared to move into her father's house and sleep in his bed. No doubt the loathsome brute had searched everything. Not that he knew or would care about the deed. What Mr. Pitt

was interested in finding was a map showing the location of the Spanish treasure taken from the *Prince Philip*.

He would look in vain among her father's things. Baret had told her aboard the *Regale* that *he* had the map and that the treasure was stowed on the Spanish pearl island of Margarita. But Pitt didn't know that. She wondered if Baret had ever gone to the island. That was doubtful, since he had been fully occupied with a Spanish don he'd taken as prisoner from a galleon. Don Miguel was the son of the planter who had bought Baret's father as a slave. Though there'd been too much happening recently to ask Baret what he had learned from Don Miguel, she suspected he had managed to gain the information he needed. He appeared confident in his quest of finding his father, planning to sail with Henry Morgan under Governor Modyford's sanction.

Zeddie slowed the buggy. Emerald shaded her eyes beneath her sun hat and looked ahead across the cane fields where the slaves were busy at work under the watchful eye of an African foreman. Mr. Pitt was nowhere in sight, but she believed him to be somewhere in the area. He often rode his horse through the fields to make certain those in charge of the cane workers also toed the line.

She leaned forward on the seat as the fringe danced on the buggy top, glancing about anxiously for a sign of Minette. Zeddie had been sent to locate her on the evening of the governor's dinner in Port Royal. He'd reported back yesterday that although he'd been unable to find her, Ngozi had managed to get a message to him telling him that Minette was working in the cook-house near Mr. Pitt's stockade for disobedient slaves.

Emerald was quite aware of what the stockade was. There had never been one when her father managed Foxemoore, but Lady Sophie knew little of what was going on, and she trusted Mr. Pitt. Cousin Geneva was ill, and Lord Felix, if he did know, wasn't likely to be disturbed as long as things on the plantation remained quiet. One uprising several months ago was enough, and Lavender's mother had died in that brief horror. There was little sympathy for the slaves on Foxemoore right now, as long as Pitt did his job.

The boiling house was working at full capacity when Zeddie brought the buggy to a stop in the work yard. The steam from the huge kettles and the heavy smell of burned sugar and mo-

lasses, which would be sold to make Jamaican rum, hung like sticky vapor on the air.

Emerald's eyes flickered with pain as several African women walked by, carrying pots on their heads. They were unclothed from the waist up, and it infuriated her that the women should be treated with such indignity! Before Great-uncle Mathias had died, she and Minette had worked with him to make certain that clothing was distributed. But beside being cruel, Mr. Pitt was a lustful man. He enjoyed debauchery and kept several women for his selfish use. *There will be a quick end to that!* thought Emerald.

The slaves were busy at work as Zeddie parked the buggy in the clearing of rust-brown earth near several wooden frame buildings and the cluster of huts used as receiving stations for Mr. Pitt's paperwork. She was gathering her skirts to climb down when Zeddie laid a hand on her arm, his one eye grave.

"Maybe ye ought to wait and let me bring Minette out."

She knew why he said this. The scene would not leave a pleasant memory.

"I've been here before with Mathias many times. I know full well 'tis an ugly, brutal sight. But I want to see. The Lord has blessed me far above all I could expect or hope for, and in my blessing I don't want to become like Sophie and Geneva, aware only of the pleasantness of the sugar estate. We must never forget the cost in human suffering and indignities."

Zeddie's pride in her showed, but he looked worried just the same. "Don't forget, m'gal, you're but a sweet child compared to clever slavers and businessmen like Lord Felix and Sir Jasper. If you aim to take 'em on where it hurts, you'll be needing Captain Buckingham at your side. And while the betrothal takes place in two weeks, it's also true he'll be gone at sea with Morgan for a year or more after that."

She smiled. "I have you, don't forget. And I've rare plans for Ngozi. And maybe Ty too, if I could get word to him in the Blue Mountains." She gazed off briefly toward the lush tropical ranges standing against the clear sky. "I wonder if Ngozi would know how to get word to him?"

"If there's a way, Ngozi be the one, all right. And from the way he treated me the other night, he's as loyal to you as they come. But Lord Felix is the one I worry about. There's nothing worse than a roaring lion except a wily serpent hiding in the tall

grass. That's what Lord Felix is, if you don't mind my saying so. He won't sit back and let a young woman marry his lordship and meddle where he has stout plans."

"I've no plans to start a hurricane," she said. "I expect to start out cautiously. But concerning Minette and Ty, there'll be no compromise—" She stopped, seeing his expression change and feeling his hand tighten on her arm. He was looking past her toward the boiling house office.

"Speak of trouble, m'gal, it's come to meet us."

Emerald turned her head and saw not Mr. Pitt but a handsome, muscled African, bare from the waist up. Sempala wore soiled cotton britches cut off at the knees and a hat of dried woven cane leaves. He had apparently come from inside the boiling house. He was followed by two other Africans who served him as law enforcers, which meant that they were big enough and strong enough to crack down on any worker who might decide to rebel under his workload.

Sempala looked toward the new buggy and then at Emerald's expensive finery. He must have recognized her at once, for he removed his hat in deference. She could tell by his sullen expression that he was not a happy man. He must know she had come for Minette. Sempala was Mr. Pitt's chief foreman, whose name he had changed to "Big Boy" to show contemptuous authority over his fellow Africans. Though Pitt had chosen him, Emerald knew he had no liking for Sempala. He was merely useful in carrying out Pitt's orders.

It was unfortunate, thought Emerald, that overseers like Pitt were allowed to choose the slaves they wanted to have authority over the other workers. To guarantee their own better treatment at the hands of an overseer, many were obliged to use whatever tactics necessary to keep order in the fields and at the boiling house. Like Pitt, Sempala carried a short whip, and a machete hung on a leather thong belt.

She recalled that he had once asked to marry Minette. Her cousin had refused him and later told Emerald that Sempala had never forgiven her. That he might now dislike Minette with the same intensity with which he had "loved" her was a frightening thought. He had once called her a "White Heart," meaning that she had betrayed her own people and was good for little else except humiliation.

Emerald's throat tightened, and for the first time she entertained the horrid thought that Minette might have been compromised. The thought turned her hands cold. Gathering her skirts, with Zeddie's help she climbed down from the buggy seat.

Zeddie straightened his baldric with its two big dueling pistols and cocked his roosterlike eye toward Sempala, as if to warn in advance that the slightest insult would mean trouble.

"It's all right, Zeddie," she whispered. "By now they've all heard about the upcoming betrothal."

"Don't forget, Pitt has Lord Felix on his side."

"I'm not forgetting. But we have Baret."

She walked across the hot dusty yard, and Sempala came to meet her. For a moment the noise of the slaves ceased, and silence prevailed. Eyes shifted to the contrasting sight of sweet loveliness in lime green silk and lace invading the world of squalor, sweat, and torment.

Emerald stopped and waited in the intense sunlight. Most of the slaves went back to work, but one young African girl stood barefoot, staring.

Sempala stopped a few feet away, holding his cane hat. "Welcome home, Miss Emerald."

"Thank you. Where's my cousin Minette?"

The deliberate use of the word *cousin* wasn't lost on him, and his gaze shifted to the dirt. "Out back of the boilin' house. Mister Pitt wants an eye on the molasses at night. Says slaves been stealin' syrup."

Emerald looked scornful. "I suspect he is his own thief. He always did smuggle it to pirates at Chocolata Hole."

"Yes, Miss Emerald. If you say so."

"Is Minette in the cookhouse?"

He hunched his broad shoulders as though to loosen the taut muscles and glanced away. "She was."

Alarm set in. "Was? Where is she now?"

"Sick. She's been sick days now."

"Sick?" she repeated, her alarm increasing as he avoided her eyes.

"Got sweating sickness."

"Where is she?"

He shifted his feet. "Out back, Miss."

"Out back *where*? Quickly, Sempala!"

He moistened his lips and kept his eyes on the ground. "In my hut."

Emerald's jaw tightened. Zeddie took a step forward, but Emerald laid a hand on his wrist. She handed him her closed parasol and, picking up her skirts, began to run across the yard toward the cluster of huts and buildings, ignoring the slaves, who again stared in silence. Some moved out of her way, knowing Minette and Ty were her cousins.

Sempala groaned as he trotted just behind her, followed by the scowling Zeddie, who had drawn a long-barreled pistol. His temperature was obviously rising.

"I didn't hurt her none!" Sempala protested.

Emerald stopped in the midst of some huts, breathing hard. The sweltering sun beat on her head. "Which hut?"

He pointed. "That one."

Emerald walked briskly toward the small round thatched shack whose door already stood ajar. Flies were drawn to the shade. A sickening odor filled the stifling air. She looked at some naked children squatting in the shade of a breadfruit tree.

The sweating sickness. She hesitated before going in, fearful of the condition in which she might find Minette. Mustering her courage, she prayed silently and then stepped through the doorway into the hot, dimly lighted hut.

Emerald held to the door frame for support, staring down at the thin figure drawn up into a fetal position on a dirty blanket in one corner of the floor. She found herself protesting the sight. This girl couldn't be Minette. Not this scrawny sick figure in a tattered tunic.

Emerald went toward her and sank down beside the blanket, unmindful of the luxurious folds of her silk skirts. Her eyes anxiously searched her cousin, as close to her heart as any sister could be.

"Minette," she whispered, reaching for her gently, noting the torn calico slave frock and her bare dusty feet.

Minette moaned in terror. "Don't touch me—"

"Minette, it's Emerald. Don't be afraid. I've come to help you—to take you away from here." She smoothed back the wild honey-colored ringlets that stuck to Minette's face. Her skin was terribly hot, and her frock was soaked with sweat.

Minette's amber eyes stared upward, dazed. She tried to speak, but her throat seemed parched.

"It's going to be all right now," whispered Emerald.

"Em—" Then came a cracked hysterical cry. "*Em—rald!*" Tears ran down her face, leaving little trails in the layer of dust.

Heedless, Emerald grasped her frail quivering body to her own as Minette sobbed.

"Oh, Emerald—"

"Hush, it's going to be all right now. I'm taking you away. You're going to be better soon."

But would she? Emerald looked into the thin face. What would she do with her? She couldn't bring her to the Great House yet. She must take her to the manor house, where she could nurse her until Baret arrived in a few days.

She laid Minette back down on the blanket and disentangled her weak grip. "It's all right," she repeated. "Lie still. We're leaving here. I'll call for Zeddie."

Minette tried to clutch her, to keep her from leaving, but Emerald stood to her feet and hurried to the hut door, holding back her dismay.

Zeddie stood waiting out in the hot bright sunshine.

"Zeddie! Can you carry her? We'll bring her to the manor house."

"Aye. That scurvy shark Pitt," he grumbled between his teeth as he walked in. A look of pity showed on his face as he neared the old blanket and looked down at the girl. He stooped and gathered up Minette to carry her away. "Looks like plague fever to me—and if it is, she won't be the last to come down with it."

*Plague!* Emerald held back a wince of horror. If it was, the sickness could indeed sweep the plantation, leaving few, if any, alive, including the family in the Great House.

"The doctor will know," she said worriedly. "Geneva's personal physician is likely to be rooming in the house."

Emerald came out the hut door, followed by Zeddie carrying the childlike figure of Minette.

Sempala loitered nearby and shifted his stance as his eyes followed Zeddie.

"It wasn't me who did this to her. It were Mister Pitt. He wouldn't let me call for no doctor—"

Emerald was more concerned over the kind of sickness that was ravaging Minette's body than she was angry. Sempala was right. If anyone was to blame it was Mr. Pitt—Pitt and the family in the Great House.

"Have you told me the truth about not touching her?" Emerald demanded, looking him evenly in the eye as he towered above her.

"Yes, Miss, I told the truth. When she got the fever, Mr. Pitt got mad and told me to take her. I been looking after her, me and the old woman Ngozi sent. Said he'd skin me if I touched Miss Emerald's cousin. And that pirate been asking for her too. Farrow was his name. But I don't trust him neither, so we didn't tell him where she was. He thinks she run away to the mountain."

A silent breath escaped her. *Thank you, Father, for protecting her.*

"Then you need not worry, Sempala. You're right about who's to blame."

He lowered his voice. "You come at a high time. Seeing your cousin Ty is down from Blue Mountain. He is in a heap of fire. Good thing you is dressed like a chieftain's daughter, 'cause Mr. Pitt is plannin' himself a skinnin'."

Emerald whirled toward him, her eyes meeting his deep gaze, unsure whether she had heard him right. Did she see friendliness in his eyes or secret contempt?

"Ty?" came her dread whisper. She held the sides of her skirts. "He's here?"

He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the boiling house, where steam fumed up like clouds of sulphur mist.

"Ty was a fool. He come for his sister, but Pitt found him. Nobody escapes Mr. Pitt and his hounds."

Emerald's fear grew like the disease that threatened to suck the life from Minette—until she remembered who the new Emerald Harwick was. Pitt *couldn't* hurt Ty! She wouldn't allow it. Not this time.

"Where is Ty?" And her voice sounded steady.

Sempala looked toward the dusty road. "Mr. Pitt has him at the stockade. He and Minette was goin' to try to run away to a pirate ship with that Cap'n Farrow. Pitt, he learned about it."

Emerald's heart chilled with fear and loathing. She knew well enough what it meant that "Pitt has him at the stockade." Without a word she hurried after Zeddie.

Zeddie brought Minette to the buggy and was laying her down on the small backseat when Emerald approached.

“Bring her to the manor. Then go to the Great House for a doctor, will you? I’ve got to loose Ty!”

Zeddie turned. “Loose Ty? M’gal, the sun’s gone to ye!”

“Pitt has him in the stockade!”

“Good mercy, I ain’t lettin’ you go there alone. Captain Buckingham would call me to the yardarm for neglect.”

Emerald climbed into the seat. “Then hurry. We’ll bring Minette to the manor first. Oh, I wish Baret were here. He’d know what to do.”

“You’re doin’ fine, m’gal, and you’ve got his name to shield you.”

As Zeddie drove the buggy away, Sempala came to stand near the road, holding his whip in one hand and Minette’s hoe in the other. A beaten look showed on his tired face, as though he was resigned to knowing he would never see Minette again.